

PERMANENCE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

FRAMEWORK

This framework was developed and discussed at a national Experts Meeting co-sponsored on June 7-8, 2004 by the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work and Casey Family Services through the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. The Expert Meeting is a core component of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Permanence for Young People that both organizations hope to help to co-sponsor in 2005, along with other national organizations and states. This framework can also stand on its own to guide child welfare agencies across the country to help young people achieve and maintain permanent family relationships. It neither prescribes nor recommends best practice models; rather, it proposes six key components of successfully identifying and supporting permanent family relationships for young people in out-of-home care.

The belief and value that every child and young person deserves a permanent family relationship is paramount in this work. Permanence is not a philosophical process, a plan, or a foster care placement, nor is it intended to be a family relationship that lasts only until the child turns age 18. Rather, permanence is about locating and supporting a lifetime family. For young people in out-of-home placement, planning for permanence should begin at entry into care, and be youth-driven, family-focused, culturally competent, continuous, and approached with the highest degree of urgency. Child welfare agencies, in partnership with the larger community, have a moral and professional responsibility to find a permanent family relationship for each child and young person in foster care.

Permanence should bring physical, legal and emotional safety and security within the context of a family relationship and allow multiple relationships with a variety of caring adults. At the same time, young people in out-of-home care must be given opportunities, within the family and community environment, to learn the array of life skills necessary to become independent and interdependent adults. Ensuring that children and young people in foster care have both permanent relationships AND life skills for independence is critical to future well-being.

Permanence is achieved with a family relationship that offers safe, stable, and committed parenting, unconditional love and lifelong support, and legal family membership status. Permanence can be the result of preservation of the family, reunification with birth family; or legal guardianship or adoption by kin, fictive kin, or other caring and committed adults.

Philosophy

This youth permanency framework is built upon seven key foundational principles. These principles express the overarching values that must guide all policies, programs, practices, services and supports for young people. They are interrelated and work together in a dynamic, synergistic way. While these principles are presented in a sequential order, this order does not reflect a preferential

order or each principle's respective worth or relevance. Each principle is critical and should be reflected in all policies, programs, practices, services and supports of the agency.

All permanency policies, programs, practices, services and supports should be developed and implemented in ways that:

1. Recognize that every young person is entitled to a permanent family relationship, demonstrate that the agency is committed to achieving that goal, and include multiple systems and the community at large in the effort to identify and support such relationships.
2. Are driven by the young people themselves, in full partnership with their families and the agency in all decision-making and planning for their futures, recognizing that young people are the best source of information about their own strengths and needs.
3. Acknowledge that permanence includes: a stable, healthy and lasting living situation within the context of a family relationship with at least one committed adult; reliable, continuous and healthy connections with siblings, birth parents, extended family and a network of other significant adults; and education and/or employment, life skills, supports and services.
4. Begin at first placement. Efforts to achieve timely permanency through reunification with the young person's birth family must begin as soon as the young person is placed, while concurrently engaging in contingency planning with family involvement regarding the range of permanency options that can ensure stability and continuity of relationships if continued out-of-home placement is needed.
5. Honor the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual backgrounds of young people and their families and respect differences in sexual orientation.
6. Recognize and build upon the strengths and resilience of young people, their parents, their families, and other significant adults.
7. Ensure that services and supports are provided in ways that are fair, responsive, and accountable to young people and their families, and do not stigmatize them, their families or their caregivers.

Components

The seven key principles described above can be translated into practice through six component areas of the work of the agency. Work done in each component should reflect the core values defined by the key principles. In order to develop an effective and comprehensive system of permanence for young people, child welfare agencies should address all six of these components. Dramatic improvements in the overall system of identifying, supporting, and maintaining permanent family connections for young people in out-of-home placement will only occur when improvements in each of the six individual components are achieved.

1. Empower young people through information, support, and skills (including independent living skills) to be fully involved partners in directing their own permanency planning and decision-making.
 - A. Staff value, support, and provide opportunities for young people to advocate for themselves, young people receive preparation that enables them to acquire the skills necessary to do so, and communication with them is honest, direct, and respects them as true partners.
 - B. Agencies place young people in positions where they are in charge of driving discussions and options and they receive training, preparation, services and support from child welfare agencies, multiple systems and the community at large to do so.
 - C. Staff are trained and supported in using specialized permanency planning skills that assist young people in addressing their fears, feelings, family issues, hopes, dreams, and aspirations.
2. Empower a wide range of individuals to participate in permanency planning, beginning with birth family and including extended family, tribal members, past, present and future caregivers, other adults who are significant to the young person, other systems with whom young people are involved, and other community members.
 - A. Young people and individuals identified by them, including birth parents, extended family, caregivers, tribal members, and others who care about them are meaningfully included and supported in participating in all meetings, case planning, and decision-making as true partners.
 - B. Agencies respect and accommodate the needs of young people and individuals identified by them, including birth parents, extended family, caregivers, tribal members, and others who care about them, to enable and support their participation as true partners.
 - C. Young people are supported in maintaining, identifying, seeking out, and developing relationships with significant connections, including birth parents, siblings, both paternal and maternal kin, and other significant caring adults (such as past caregivers), including those that may have occurred earlier in life.
 - D. Multiple systems within the community, including health, mental health, education, recreation, job training, juvenile justice, family court, faith-based organizations and the business community are engaged in the permanency planning process, where appropriate, for individual young people.

3. Consider, explore and implement a full range of permanency options in a timely and continuous way.

- A. Agencies, young people, and their families together identify a full range of actual and available permanency options without imposing limitations based on the age of the youth, beginning with an extensive identification of the family of origin.
- B. Agencies articulate to young people, their families, and their caregivers the full range of actual and available permanency options and the implications of each.
- C. The full team (including young people, family members, child welfare staff, staff of other systems with whom young people are involved and other community stakeholders) receive training and support on a full spectrum of options and are provided opportunities to express and work through their values related to permanency.
- D. Concurrent planning for multiple options and relationships is employed early, regularly and on an ongoing basis for all young people, integrating a plan for family permanency together with a plan for the development of life skills and the provision of supports and services.
- E. The permanency option decided upon together with each team (including young person, family members, and other significant adults) is based on the young person's individual situation, needs and preferences; represents his or her best interest; and is reassessed regularly until a plan is achieved that includes a permanent family relationship as well as life skills, supports and services.
- F. Agency infrastructure and resources value and support the consideration of all potential family permanency outcomes as they relate to meeting the best interests of the young person.

4. From the beginning, continuously and concurrently employ a comprehensive range of recruitment options.

Recruitment from Existing Connections and Relationships

- A. Young people are asked regularly and systematically about people in their lives who could assist in helping them plan for their future and/or serve as permanent resources.
- B. Young people are provided with the skills and opportunities to interact with multiple systems and community members in ways that help build permanent relationships.
- C. Multiple strategies are employed to identify potential permanent family resources and significant adult connections, including a review of the entire case file, as well as conversations with multiple sources, such as the young person, birth parents, siblings, extended family members, tribal members, former and current caregivers, teachers, prior case workers, and other individuals in the community who care about the young person.

- D. Youth-specific recruitment strategies specific to each young person's network of relationships are used to simultaneously engage individuals identified by young people in a joint planning process and in a process of mutual exploration of the extent and level of permanent family commitment they could provide.

Recruitment of "New" Resource Families

- E. Youth and those who care for them are educated on possible recruitment strategies for new resource families, including relevant considerations regarding confidentiality, sharing of information and protection of the youth from exploitation.
- F. Youth-designed, self-promoting recruitment strategies and processes are employed, depending on the youth's preferences and level of comfort.
- G. All recruitment messages are shaped by the voices of young people and families who have lived/experienced the continuum of permanency relationships.
- H. An array of methods and media are used to raise awareness about the needs of young people, as well as to communicate recruitment messages to the community.
- I. A pool of potential permanency resource families who reflect the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual backgrounds of the young people needing placement exists and is continually replenished through targeted recruitment efforts.
- J. A pool of potential permanency resource families who have a demonstrated knowledge of, commitment to, and concern for young people and can parent young people with the unique needs, characteristics, and issues represented in the population exists and is continually replenished through targeted recruitment efforts.

5. From the beginning of placement, provide services and supports to continuously ensure that young people and their families have every opportunity to achieve and maintain physical, emotional, and legal permanence.

- A. Young people, in partnership with agencies, make decisions about obtaining services and supports, which are made available through clearly established, consistent processes.
- B. Birth family and tribal members, caregivers, other significant adults in a young person's life, and service providers involved with the youth are involved in decisions about obtaining services and supports, which are made available through clearly established, consistent processes.
- C. Services and supports are provided to young people and their parents or their permanent families in ways that are:
 - 1. urgent – recognize the essential priority of assuring love and commitment to young people while meeting their well-being needs, including their educational needs;
 - 2. comprehensive – address all aspects of a young person's well-being, including health, mental health, education and life skills;

3. continuous – available from the day of entry into care to beyond the achievement of a permanency goal, regardless of age;
 4. universally available – are available regardless of permanency goal, educational or employment choice, living arrangement, placement location, or permanency outcome;
 5. customized – meet the unique needs of young people, birth families and permanent families and are assessed and adjusted regularly to reflect progress and changes;
 6. culturally appropriate – value and honor the culture of the young person and his/her birth family and permanent family; and
 7. accessible – provide access to the full range of services and supports in a timely and convenient manner.
- D. The financial needs of young people and their families are recognized, sources of funding to meet their needs are identified, and assistance in accessing such funding is provided, regardless of legal status.
- E. Community members and community agencies are involved in providing and advocating for supports and services to young people and their families.
6. Agencies collaborate with other systems that serve young people and families to engage young people and families as true partners and to provide services, support and opportunities during and after placement.
- A. Agency staff and partners in other systems receive training, education, and support to address their fears, feelings, assumptions, and beliefs about permanency and positive youth development to support a culture of youth and family partnership.
 - B. Young people, their families, and others who care about young people are directly involved in the development and delivery of all agency and cross-system training and education about permanency and positive youth development to support a culture of youth and family partnership.
 - C. Young people, their families, and the systems that serve them (including courts and attorneys) have a common understanding, language and set of beliefs about permanency definitions and work to expand permanency options with a focus on youth-defined options.
 - D. Agency staff, together with young people and families, engage both traditional and non-traditional partners in the community to broaden awareness and to advocate for the need for life skills and permanence for young people in out-of-home care.
 - E. Young people and families are continuously involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating the systems that serve them.
 - F. Agency staff, together with young people and families, continuously identify and address critical system, cross-system, and policy changes needed to develop an effective and comprehensive system of permanence for young people.